

18. SIGHT RECORD OF HORNED LARK *EREMOPHILA ALPESTRIS* NEAR DELHI

The Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* is a holarctic species, widespread from arctic tundras to the high mountain plateaux. Populations breeding at high latitudes undertake annual migrations to the northern temperate zones, whereas those breeding above the tree-line in lower latitude mountain ranges show altitudinal movements. One anomalous population in the northern Andes of South America is sedentary.

In India, the species is common at high altitude in Ladakh, particularly above 4,000 m (*pers. obs.*), wintering down to about 3,000 m (Grimmett, Inskipp and Inskipp (1998), BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT).

On September 30, 2001, seven members of the Delhi Bird Group were completing an early morning visit to the Yamuna River with a walk along the bank, overlooking ash pits at Khader, south of Okhla, New Delhi. It was a clear, warm sunny morning with good visibility. The pits provided habitats ranging from open shallow water, wet substrates, patches of low vegetation and sparse grass, along with drier open ground. By 0830 hrs, we were spread out along the bank, watching Indian Short-toed Larks *Calandrella raytal*, Common Crested Larks *Galerida cristata* and Eurasian Tree Pipits *Anthus trivialis*, the latter seemingly newly arrived migrants and in a loose, noisy group of about 15.

Whilst scanning the drier region close to the southern end of the pit, checking carefully through the birds as they foraged on the ground, my attention was quickly drawn to a large stocky lark, about the size of a Common Crested Lark, but with no suggestion of a crest. Its plain, apparently unmarked upperparts matched almost perfectly the pale ashy, brown grey substrate. It was feeding close to the ground, with a shuffling, crouched gait. As it raised its head, it showed striking features of a bold black mask extending from the bill, through the eyes and on to the ear coverts, a black band across the upper breast and a narrow black line extending across the front of the forecrown. These features contrasted with the whitish facial background. The rest of the crown, nape and upperparts were a pale greyish brown. The remainder of the underparts was whitish, with no streaks.

19. NIDIFICATION OF THE COMMON RAVEN *CORVUS CORAX* IN THE THAR DESERT

On the afternoon of February 17, 2001 we were driving on National Highway No. 12 towards Bikaner. Near Dungargarh, Bikaner district, our attention was drawn to a Common Raven *Corvus corax* flying towards a nest on an electric pylon. We scoped the nest and observed two fledged young, which were later fed by another adult which had alighted on the nest. Having confirmed the breeding of the

I was immediately able to identify the bird as a Horned Lark, a species I have seen on numerous occasions over the last 25 years. I watched it with binoculars for about a minute at a range of c. 40 m. It then flew, showing white outer tail feathers in flight, before settling again about 50 m away in an area of sparse, short vegetation, but close to Bill Harvey and Manoj Gupta who were further along the bank. I was able to draw their attention to the lark and they also obtained a good view. In addition to the features I had noted, they pointed out the "horns", the fine black feathers that form posterior tips of the forehead marking, above the ear coverts, the almost pinkish grey of upperparts that merged so closely with the ash substrate and its streamlined, almost bunting-like shape.

Other members of the party joined us a couple of minutes later and got briefer views before the bird flew again, settling this time on a pipe on top of the bank a good 100 m away. It remained perched there for another minute before being disturbed by a passerby. Despite a thorough search for it afterwards, it was never found again. The site was checked on a number of occasions by other observers over the following week, without success.

The well-marked facial pattern and apparent absence of prominent streaks on the upperparts indicate that this individual was an adult male.

This would appear to be the first record in India south of the high Himalaya. Himalayan populations are not known to undertake long-distance migration, and winter no further south than the foothills, and even then mainly at relatively high altitude. This is a highly unexpected record of a very distinctive species, but at a time of the year when there is considerable movement of birds southward on passage. It is not inconceivable that this vagrant may have associated with small flocks of other diurnal migrants descending to wintering grounds in peninsular India.

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Common Raven, we decided to examine all the nests on the electric pylons along the highway on our return journey on February 26, 2001. Between Bikaner and Dungargarh, we counted eleven nests on electric pylons. There were probably more live nests (as close sitting young were not visible from the ground), but we discounted those nests in which we did not see young birds.